

In the Shadow of Mortality: The Impact of Priming Specific Types of Death on the Terror Management Literature

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Introduction

Terror Management Theorists claim that the ability to contemplate oneself and one's future has the result of rendering our species aware of the inevitability of death, which can cause humans to become overwhelmed with terror (Pyszczynski, 2013). In the terror management literature, terror refers to feelings of anxiety or discomfort produced by mortality salience, death reminders, rather than literal terror. Death anxiety is reduced through increasing one's adherence to and support of meaningful and relevant cultural standards, values, and institutions (Pyszczynski et al., 2004).

Historically, the terror management literature has presented attention-grabbing findings, such as that those reminded of their death will make more positive evaluations of in-group members and more negative evaluations of the out-group members, as well as become physically aggressive toward dissimilar others (Cohen & Solomen, 2011; Greenberg et al., 1990). However, since individuals' responses to death reminders stem from their desire to affirm their worth in the face of mortality, it stands to reason that death reminders could also have a positive impact on people.

Terror management research manipulates mortality salience (MS) by asking participants to respond to two prompts about death, i.e., briefly describe the emotions that the thought of dying arouses in you, and briefly describe as specifically as you can what you believe will happen to you physically as you die and after you are dead. The fact that death is primed in a uniform manner across all studies leaves a large gap in the literature, i.e., the manner in which death is imagined could impact responses. This likely explains why this theory contains two competing hypotheses to explain the attitude changes that occurs after death reminders. The worldview polarization hypothesis, asserts that individuals will become more polarized in their previous political orientation (Pyszczynski, 2013). On the other hand, the conservative shift hypothesis, claims that people will become more conservative.

Purpose

The purpose of the current research is to investigate the origin of these hypotheses by manipulating how death is primed, i.e., by priming specific ways of dying.

This study consisted of five conditions

- Neutral Mortality Salience (Typical death prompt described above)
- Sudden Mortality Salience (Car accident death prompt)
- Disgust Mortality Salience (Illness death prompt)
- Terror Salience (Negative public speaking experience)
- Neutral Control (Watching television prompt)

The dependent measures were the difference between authoritarianism pretest and posttest scores and scores on a questionnaire measure of perceptions of meaning in life.

Hypotheses:

- Those in the Mortality Salience conditions would score higher on both measures than those in the Terror condition.
- Those in the Specified Mortality Salience conditions would score higher on both measures than those in the Non-Specified Mortality Salience condition.
- Those in the Terror condition will score higher on both measures than those in the Neutral control condition.

Methodology

Participants:

Participants ($N=230$) in this study were drawn from the undergraduate student subject pool at the University of the Fraser Valley from PSYC 101 and 102, as well as from 3 political science classes.

Materials:

- HEXACO-PI-R-60 Scales: Honesty/Humility, Emotionality, Conscientiousness, and Openness to Experience Scales (Lee & Ashton, 2009)
- The Revised Adult Attachment Scale-Close Relationships Version (Collins, 1996)
- Two 10-item measures of child-rearing values (authoritarianism pretest and posttest) (based on Feldman and Stenness' 1997 4-item version)
- Six items from a short version of the Right-Wing Authoritarian Scale (Manganelli Rattazzi, Bobbio, & Canova, 2007).
- For the manipulation, participants answered variations of the same two prompts, described in the introduction section, in response to imagining dying in a car accident (Sudden MS), dying as a result of a disgusting illness (Disgust MS), dying in a non-specified manner (Neutral MS), experiencing a negative public speaking experience (Terror), or watching television (Control).
- A maze was used as a distractor task to allow for death thoughts to leave conscious awareness.
- Perception of meaning in life questionnaire

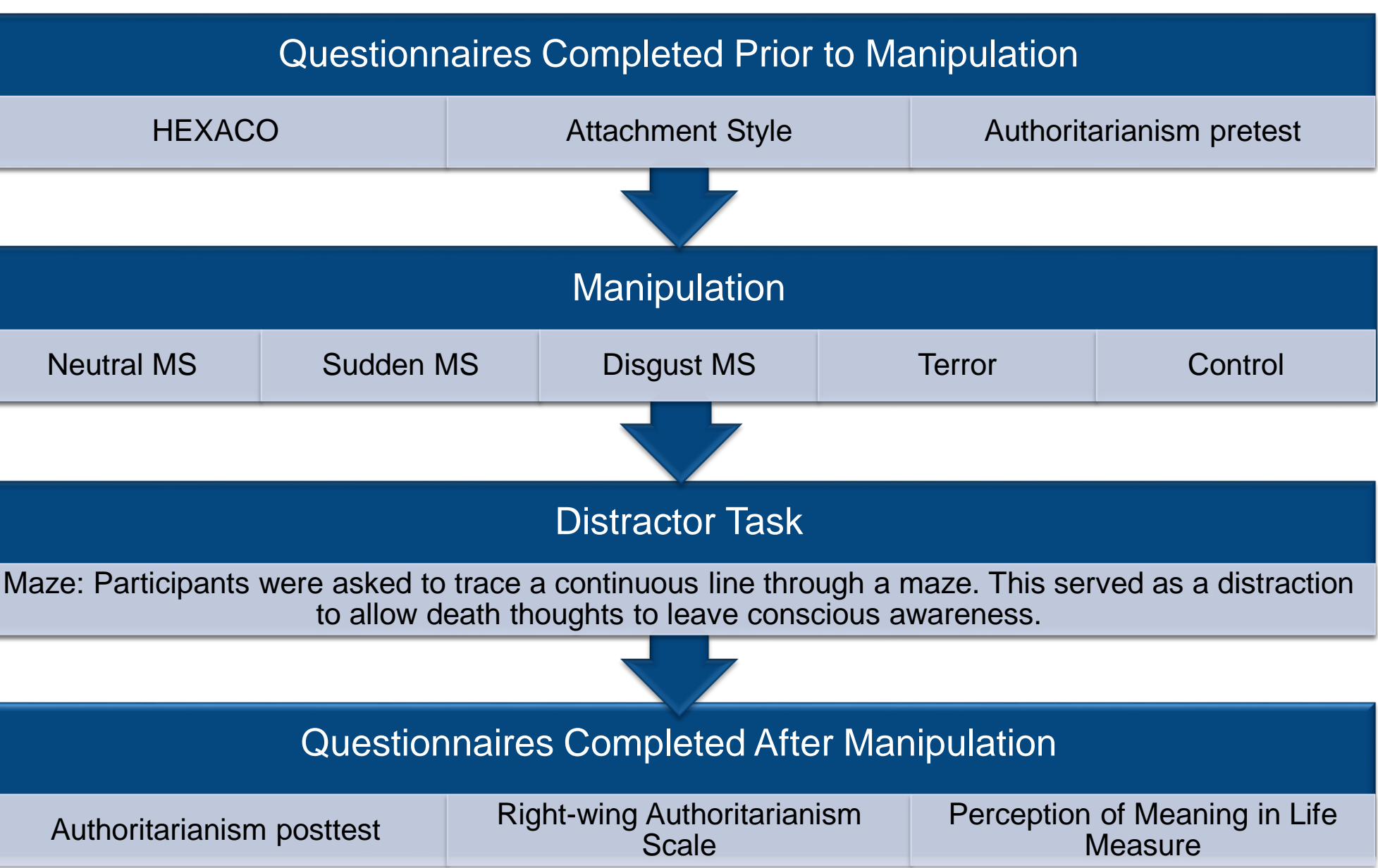
Manipulation Example: Sudden MS Condition

Imagine that you are the victim of a fatal car crash.

1. Briefly describe the emotions that the thought of dying in this manner arouses in you.

2. Briefly describe as specifically as you can what you believe will happen to you physically as you die and after you are dead.

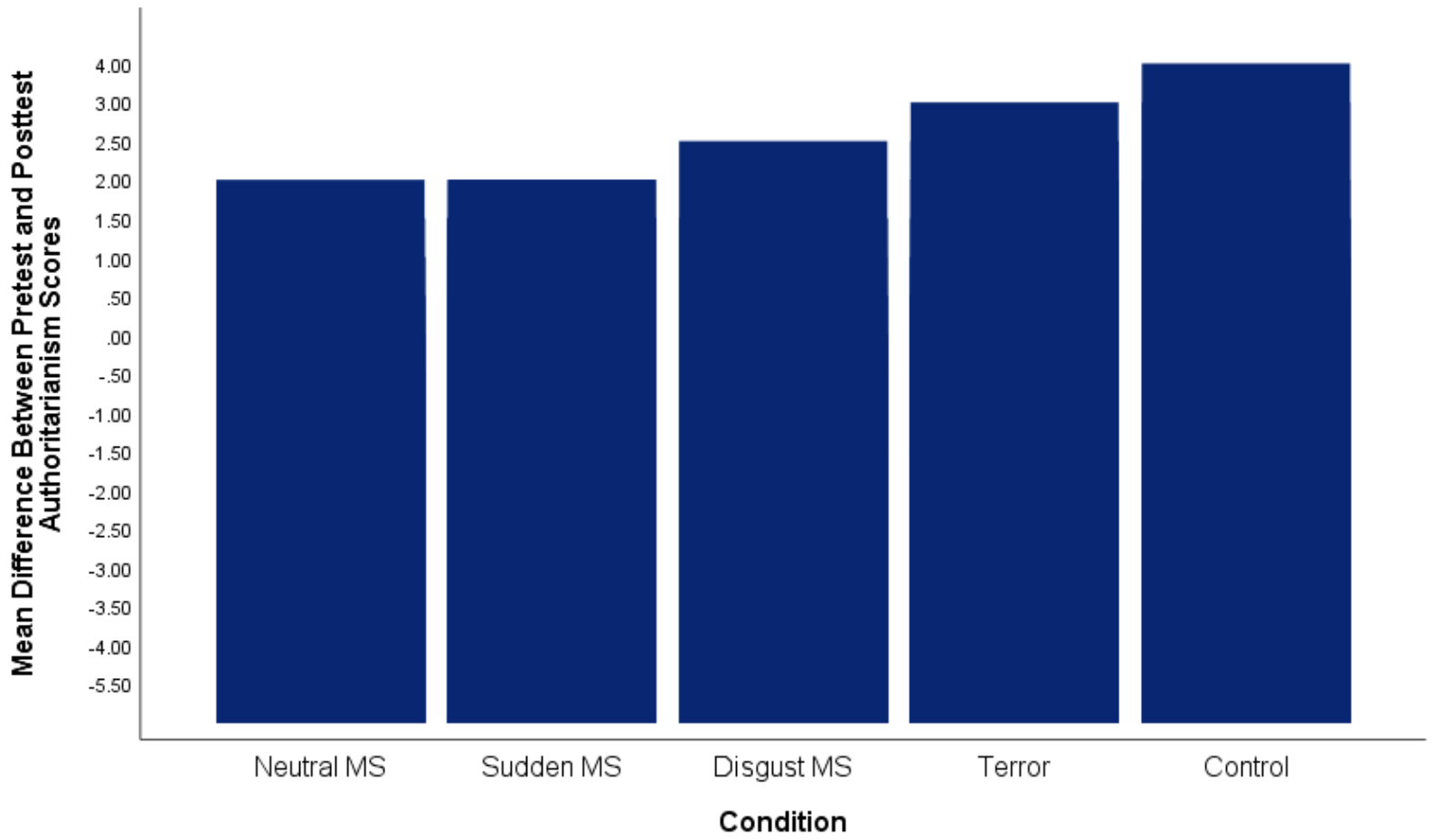
Procedure:



Results

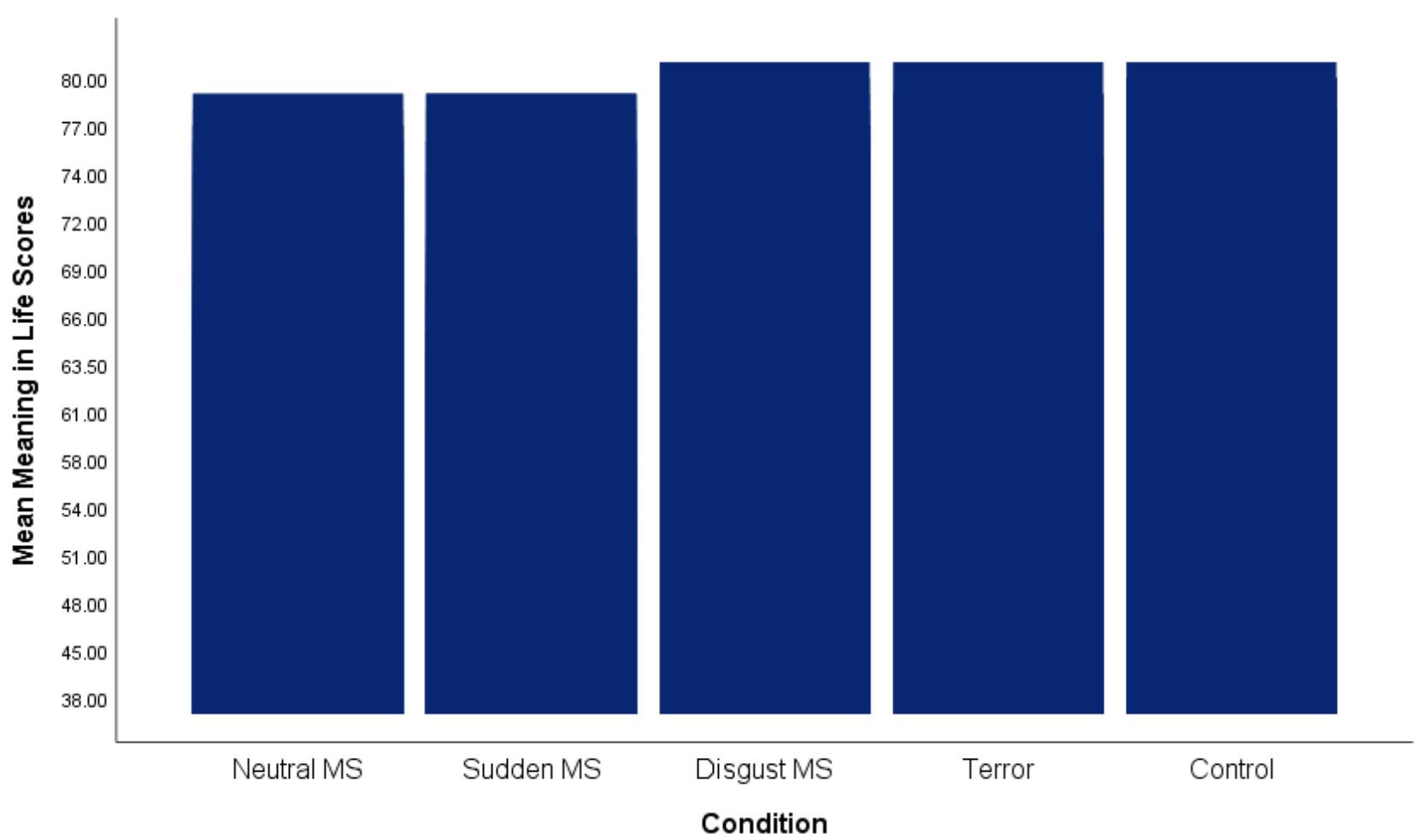
There were no significant difference between group means for the difference between authoritarianism pretest and posttest scores at the $p<.05$ level as determined by a one-way ANOVA ($F(4, 221)=1.438$, $p=.222$

Mean Difference Between Pretest and Posttest Authoritarianism Scores by Condition



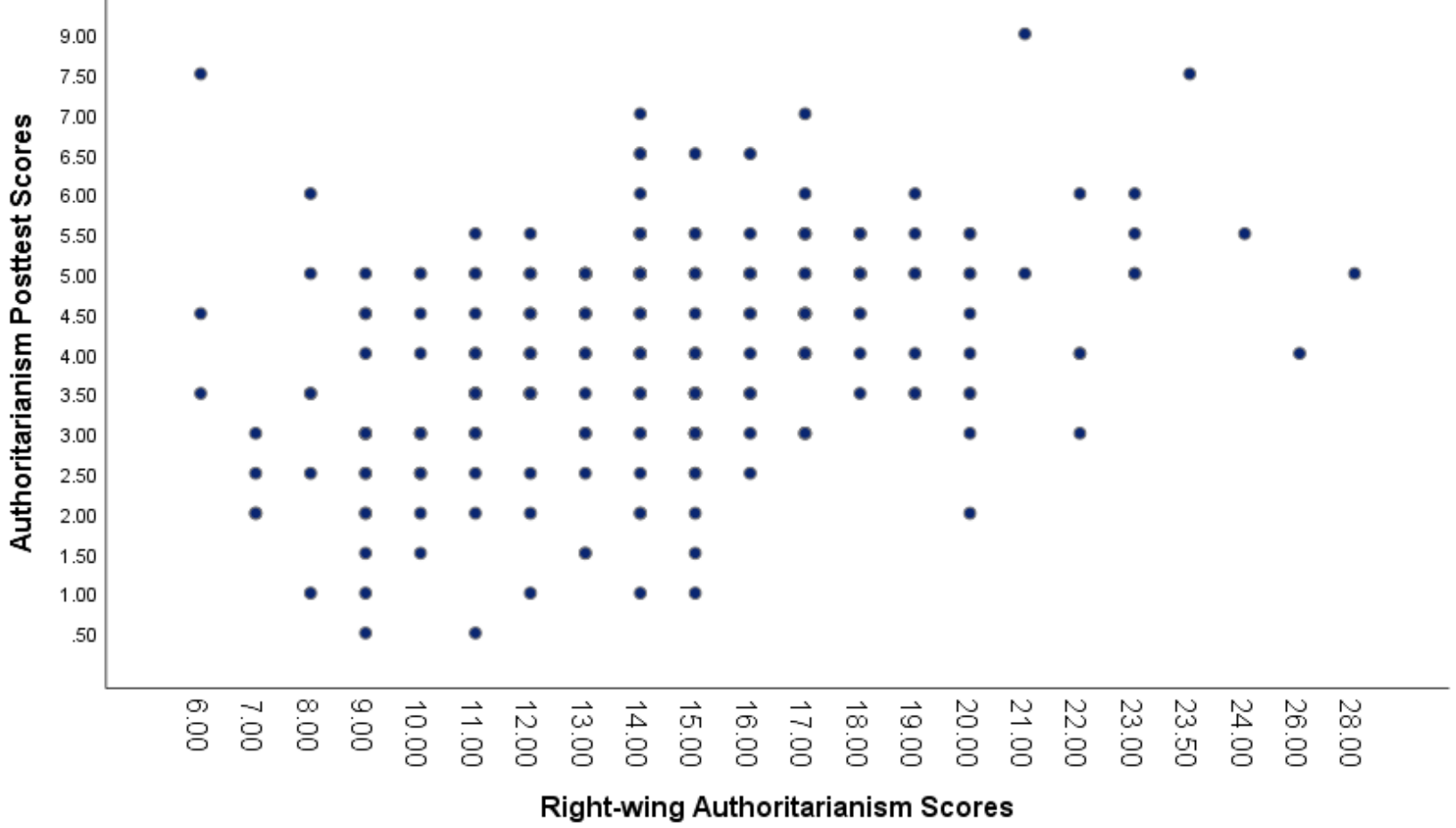
A one-way ANOVA indicated that there was a significant difference between group means for perception of meaning in life scores at the $p<.05$ level ($F(4, 222)=2.669$, $p=.033$. However, post hoc comparisons with Bonferroni correction for familywise error did not find any significant differences between conditions.

Mean Perception of Meaning in Life Scores by Condition



There was a significant positive correlation between the posttest authoritarianism scores and responses to the six items from the right-wing authoritarianism scale $r=.372$, $p<.05$ Additionally, posttest authoritarianism scores were significantly positively correlated with emotionality $r=.163$, $p<.05$ and a significant negatively correlated with openness to experience $r=-.289$, $p<.05$

Correlation between Authoritarianism Measures



Discussion

There was no significant differences between groups for the difference between pretest and post-test authoritarianism scores by condition. This is an interesting finding because the neutral MS condition was a direct replication of previous research on responses to death reminders. This failure to replicate indicates that mortality salience may not impact attitudes and behaviours as significantly as had been previously assumed by terror management theorists. Indicating that Terror Management Theory may be in need of substantial revisions.

The significant positive correlation between the posttest authoritarianism scores and the six items from the right-wing authoritarianism scale validates the child-rearing values questionnaires as an accurate measure of authoritarianism. This contributes to the literature by providing a validated measure of authoritarianism that can be used in future research.

The lack of significant differences between conditions for perception of meaning in life scores suggests that death reminders do not impact how individuals perceive meaning. This indicates that the claim that death reminders cause individuals to increase their support for meaningful cultural values and institutions may lack support.

A limitation of this study is that it focused on the conservative shift hypothesis by using measures that assessed authoritarianism rather than a neutral measure of political orientation, i.e., a measure that would be more sensitive to left-leaning political orientations. Thus, the polarization of liberal views was not assessed. Additionally, the measure of perception of meaning in life that was used has not been validated. Thus, the lack of significant results could have been the result of the measure not being a valid measure of the perception of meaning.

Reference

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